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SUBJECT: PAVLODAR - CIVIL SOCIETY SHOWS SIGNS OF INCREASED  
ACTIVITY

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) Emboffs visited Pavlodar during June 4 to June 6 and met with the Akimat (local government administration), the ruling Nur Otan party, opposition political parties, a representative of the Central Election Commission, media, and NGOs. Akimat officials were upbeat regarding both the political and economic situation, though they admitted that rising prices and the credit crunch resulting from the global financial crisis are having a negative economic impact. Nur Otan dominates the local political scene and receives and tries to resolve citizens' complaints about corruption and socio-economic problems. Opposition parties appear to be quite weak; however, civil society organizations are becoming increasingly active on a number of issues, and cooperate with the local authorities. An evangelical pastor expressed concerns about proposed amendments to Kazakhstan's religion law. An independent journalist told us that there is pressure to censor stories, but journalists can get away with publishing critical materials about the local government, so long as they balance this with more favorable pieces. End Summary.

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Akimat Officials Upbeat on Political and Economic Situation  
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¶2. (SBU) Emboffs visited Pavlodar during June 4 to June 6, conducting meetings there with the Akimat (local government administration), the ruling Nur Otan party, opposition parties, the media, and NGOs. Pavlodar, located 120 kilometers from the Russian border, is the capital of Pavlodar oblast (region) and the industrial center of northeast Kazakhstan. Pavlodar is a multi-ethnic city, with 70 ethnic groups represented, and an overall population of 323,000. While Russians and other Slavs used to make up 70 percent of the city's population, that number has fallen in recent years to just 40 percent.

¶3. (SBU) Gulzhan Akhmetova, head of the Akimat's Internal Policy Department, told poloff that the political situation in the oblast is stable, with no inter-ethnic conflict. She said the aim of local authorities is to preserve peace and public accord. The Akimat maintains close contact with the more than 300 NGOs in Pavlodar oblast, under the umbrella "Civic Alliance" organization. Akhmetova said that the Akimat also cooperates with the 17 ethnic cultural centers operating in Pavlodar, Nur Otan and other political parties, as well as religious groups. The Religious Council of Pavlodar Oblast meets twice yearly, and representatives from all religious groups are invited to these meetings. (Note: This last claim was later contradicted by a Protestant pastor we spoke with. End Note.) The Department of Internal Policy also has a special office dedicated to monitoring the media, as well as for explaining government policies through the media and raising public awareness about specific issues.

14. (SBU) Sergey Statsenko, the head of the Akimat's Department of Entrepreneurship and Industrial Development, discussed with us the strategic goals for the oblast's economic development. Currently, Pavlodar's main industries are coal extraction and metallurgy. There are five large-scale projects being implemented in the oblast, including an aluminum processing plant and a tube-rolling mill. Key exports include metallurgical products (ferrochrome and alumina), while key imports include equipment and spare parts. One of the goals of the government is to increase the number of exporting companies. Another goal is to create a "food belt" around Pavlodar to produce dairy products and meat.

15. (SBU) The official unemployment rate in Pavlodar is 6.6 percent. Statsenko noted that due to the domestic reverberations of the global financial crisis, commercial banks have been giving fewer loans to local enterprises. The credit crunch has affected small and medium enterprises most of all. Regarding foreign business participation, Statsenko explained that the region was interested in joint ventures, not foreign loans. They would like to obtain advanced technologies and develop "know how" and high value-added production. Currently, there are no American businesses operating in the region. (Comment: Akimat officials appeared to be suspicious of the motives for our visit. They asked us repeatedly why we chose to come to Pavlodar, and with whom else we were meeting. One Akimat official seemed to know exactly where we were going to be at all times. End Comment.)

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#### Nur Otan Dominates Political Scene

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16. (SBU) Nur Otan -- President Nazarbayev's ruling party -- has 14 offices throughout Pavlodar oblast. In the Pavlodar oblast maslikhat (legislature), all 32 representatives are Nur Otan members, and in the Pavlodar city maslikhat, 23 out of 25 members are from Nur Otan, while the remaining two are political independents. Nur Otan representatives told us that the party's two main goals locally are enhancing cooperation with youth and fighting government corruption. According to Nur Otan, the political situation in the oblast is stable, but there are problems with rising food prices. As a result, real wages are not keeping up with inflation. To mitigate the problem with food prices, the party has approached commercial banks advocating for lower interest rates for local food producers.

17. (SBU) Nur Otan maintained that some large local enterprises have joined their party at their own volition, including KazChrome, Access Komir, Pavlodar Oil Refinery, and Aluminum Kazakhstan. They claimed that other political parties are not active in the region except during election periods. Nur Otan told us they maintain close cooperation with NGOs and organize joint events with them, such as job fairs, public waste management hearings, and environmental campaigns. Each Nur Otan office has an anti-corruption council that reviews corruption claims received from local citizens. They also receive and review other complaints, with 45 percent of them socio-economic in nature, such as housing, employment, and social welfare problems. Nur Otan also has telephone hotlines through which it receives anonymous complaints. (Note: Nur Otan claimed that they had "fixed" water sanitation problems in Mayskiy district --- the poorest district in the oblast -- but this claim was contradicted in our subsequent conversations with representatives of NGOs, opposition parties, and the media. End Note.)

18. (SBU) We arrived in Pavlodar on June 4, the "Day of State Symbols." This holiday was marked in Pavlodar with rallies and speeches. Nur Otan organized a youth rally on the main

town square, blocking off traffic. Young school children all wore Nur Otan tee shirts and caps. (Note: The opposition parties we spoke with compared this to the days of communism and the "young pioneers," and they complained that Nur Otan is exploiting children by using them to market Nur Otan. End Note.)

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Opposition Parties Allege Corruption and Harassment  
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¶9. (SBU) We held a round table discussion with local representatives of opposition parties -- the National Social Democratic Party (OSDP), Azat, and the unregistered Alga party -- at Alga's headquarters. In contrast to the large and modern Nur Otan building, Alga's headquarters were located on the first floor of an apartment building outside the city center. All the opposition representatives said they considered the parliamentary elections of August 2007 to be illegitimate. They complained about pervasive corruption in both the akimat and maslikhat. They told us that they have no access to the akimat and are not invited to participate in any political meetings or discussions. They also alleged government harassment against their parties. The OSDP representative even claimed that he had been assaulted and prevented from attending an important opposition meeting in Almaty. The OSDP representative claimed that OSDP has over 6,000 members in Pavlodar oblast, is recruiting new members, and is preparing for possible early parliamentary elections in the Fall of 2008. Azat said they had 5,000-7,000 members and Alga claimed they had 3,500 members in the oblast. The Alga representative said Alga provides free legal advice for local residents, including protection of their interests in court. The opposition parties claimed that unemployment in the oblast was actually close to 50 percent, and that the low figures given to us by government officials did not account for the involuntarily "self-employed," such as vendors in local bazaars.

¶10. (SBU) Sansyzbay Akimbekov, the sole representative of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) in Pavlodar, told us that all the opposition parties in the oblast are weak, and most did not have any representative offices in the individual districts of Pavlodar oblast. He maintained that during the 2007 parliamentary elections, the opposition parties were allotted sufficient broadcast media access, but did not use it effectively and did not have strong programs or agendas.

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Akimbekov further claimed that the opposition parties could not provide enough members to serve on local electoral committees, which is why political independents were found to represent them in the electoral committees. He claimed that there were some violations during the August 2007 elections, but they were of minor significance in affecting the results.

Commenting on the overall situation in Pavlodar, Akimbekov said that the oblast has good prospects, and that living standards are rising. He believes that Kazakhstan needs to have a law empowering local governments, so that decisions can be made from the bottom up. Finally, he opined that civil society in Pavlodar is quite strong, and said that the local akimat and maslikhat consult with NGOs on a regular basis.

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Evangelical Critical of Draft Religion Law  
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¶11. (SBU) Ilya Chirikov is pastor of the Jesus Christ Church, an evangelical Protestant church which opened in Pavlodar in 1993 and currently has about 400 members, more than a quarter of whom are ethnic Kazakhs. Currently, there are approximately eight or nine Protestant churches in Pavlodar.

Pastor Chirikov told us he was extremely concerned about proposed amendments to Kazakhstan's religion law which are

currently under consideration in parliament. His church sent a letter protesting the proposed legislation to the Majilis (the lower house of Kazakhstan's parliament) as well as to the local maslikhat. Chirikov complained that the legislation aims to divide religions into traditional (Muslim and Orthodox) and non-traditional groups, contains too many prohibitions, stipulates too many violations subject to fines, and includes ambiguous provisions that could be used to prosecute religious groups. Chirikov claimed his church has been encountered problems with the city akimat. For example, he said that when several young people from his church gathered on the river embankment to sing songs and to speak about God, the city akimat insisted they disperse.

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An Independent Journalist's Perspective  
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¶12. (SBU) We also met with Alexander Baranov, a journalist with the weekly Gorodskaya Nedelya, an independent newspaper established 10 years ago which claims to have a circulation of 19,000-21,000 copies. Regarding freedom of the press, Baranov said there is pressure to censor stories, but journalists have learned how to get around it. He can get away with publishing some critical materials about the local government, but this has to be balanced with more favorable pieces. Baranov discussed a recent article of his which was highly critical of the mismanagement of water resources in the oblast's poor Mayskiy district. He gave us a first-hand account of his visit to the district, including explaining to us the poor state of sanitation (e.g. lack of potable water), and the fact that the authorities were so angered by his attempts to speak to the local population that they took him in for questioning and tried to confiscate his camera. Baranov complained that there is a lack of qualified experts whom journalists can approach for commentary on salient issues. He said that government officials would never make any critical comments, and sometimes NGOs were also afraid to comment on controversial issues, fearing a loss of government contracts. He also complained that independent journalists have poor access to official information, especially to information from law enforcement authorities, and are not invited to press conferences or meetings at the akimat.

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Civil Society Shows Signs of Increased Development  
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¶13. (SBU) Yelena Anatolieva, director of the Slavic Cultural Center, a community center which serves the local Russian speaking population, told us that inter-ethnic relations in Pavlodar were generally good. However, some Russians still want to immigrate to Russia because they do not want to learn Kazakh, are concerned about local economic conditions, or want better opportunities for their children. Part of Anatolieva's role is to advise and counsel Russians who are considering immigrating. She works closely with the Russian Embassy in Astana and the Russian consulates in Almaty, Pavlodar, and Uralsk to facilitate the process. She maintained that Russia's program to repatriate Russians from abroad is not yet very successful. During the past year, 500 people applied to immigrate in Pavlodar, but only 100 people actually completed the process.

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¶14. (SBU) We also participated in an interesting round table with several NGOs, including Delta Credit (a microfinance organization), Zhardem (HIV/AIDS prevention), the Pavlodar branch of the Kazakhstan Human Rights Bureau, the Criminal Reform and Monitoring Committee, and Ecom (an environmental protection organization). All of these NGOs are part of the Civic Alliance, which is an umbrella NGO headed by Sergey Gulayev, one of only two independent members of the city maslikhat. Zhardem's target population are drug addicts, prostitutes, and homeless people. It is based in the city of

Aksu, which has the highest HIV infection rate in Pavlodar oblast. The main health problems in Pavlodar oblast include tuberculosis, drug addiction, cancer, and gastrointestinal diseases (due to poor water quality). Obstacles encountered by this NGO including a lack of funding to hire a lawyer for its staff.

¶15. (SBU) The Criminal Reform Monitoring Committee said the main issues that they are working on include prison reform, monitoring of prison conditions, and reform of the legal system. Criminal suspects and their lawyers are often unaware of the right to a jury trial, they reported. The Human Rights Bureau (HRB) provides legal advice to vulnerable groups, such as abused women, children, and adolescents. The HRB told us that they have seen a sharp rise in the sexual abuse of children, particularly in schools. Other areas that they work on include protection of mentally ill people and prison inmates. When queried, HRB told us that they have not been asked for assistance by religious groups.

¶16. (SBU) Ecom is one of three local NGOs focused on environmental protection. Ecom maintained that the high incidence of diseases such as cancer in the local population is due to radiation exposure from the former Soviet nuclear test site at Semipalatinsk. Other environmental problems include the polluted Irtysh river (resulting from upstream industrial facilities), the dumping of mercury and other industrial by-products in local lakes, and the use of gas flaring by the local oil refinery, which leads to toxic emissions. Ecom claimed that a government monitoring agency had determined that a large proportion of parents whose children suffered from cerebral spastic infantile paralysis worked at the local aluminum plant. These statistics, however, were classified, and the official who leaked this information was subsequently fired. Ecom noted that NGOs do not carry out independent research because of limited funds; thus, they have to keep pressing local authorities to release relevant environmental information. Ecom complained that despite their promises to hold environmental hearings on proposed industrial projects, local authorities hold only hearings where the outcome is already pre-determined. Furthermore, the oblast akimat's public environmental council is never convened.

¶17. (SBU) Comment: We were impressed with the high level of professionalism and dedication of these NGOs leaders. All of them stressed the low level of awareness by the local population about the issues of human rights, environmental pollution, and human health. All said that education and awareness of these issues needs to be raised in order to have a strong public dialogue. Nevertheless, we came away with the impression that the influence of civil society is growing. For instance, due to intervention by an NGO, the akimat decided to build an aluminum plant eight kilometers outside the city center, rather than closer to the center. Thus, positive steps are being made incrementally. End Comment.

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